

Leave Some Trees in Your Clearcut

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What on earth did you leave those trees for?" a forester friend asked me as we looked out over a clearcut on my land. I had left a random scattering of tall pines along with a hardwood here and a clump of leftovers there. Row upon row of newly planted pines covered the land. The big trees left behind looked like an accident. They could have been sold along with the rest. What a waste! My forester friend viewed them as unwanted competition with the new crop in the making.

Wood production is the only way some strictly utilitarian people look at forest management. Why leave perfectly good crop trees unsold? But there are other points of view.

I like the visual variety these sentinel trees provide. I prefer to see some tall vegetation in a young woods. It makes the land look more like a forest and less like . . . well . . . a clearcut or a cropland. Leaving some trees in a clearcut can give subtle values to the land.

A few big old survivors give the land a sense of history—I can keep in touch with the way the land looked before the cut. Tall isolated trees serve as perches and nest sites for hawks, owls, flycatchers and other birds. The larger hawks and owls can help keep rabbit and rodent populations at moderate levels. These bark-chewing creatures can damage or destroy little pines if they get very numerous.

Now that those little trees are 6 years old and 15 to 20 feet tall, I use the "leave trees" as reference points to help find my way. It's easy to get disoriented in stands of young trees taller than your head. I can't see far at eye level so it's hard to find my way, but I can look up and see the tops of tall trees. I know all my tall leave trees individually so I can use them as markers to help me return to an exact spot in my stand of little trees. They also come in handy when laying out fire-breaks for prescribed fire.


Perhaps best of all these tall trees allow me to get above my young trees in a climbing deer stand. I can sit there in comfort in my little climbing armchair, high in my tree, viewing my domain like a hawk. My view from above allows me to see wildlife and to take deer from the interior of the stand—in places where they would normally be inaccessible.

Now that the pines make excellent hiding and escape cover for deer, I've converted some of the little clearings near the leave trees into secret mini food patches. These are a wonderful hunting aid. There is no way to get a tractor in there so I make the patches with hand tools and herbicides.

I also left some of those trees because they produce fruits and nuts for wildlife. Some of my favorites are persimmons and oaks. In the context of production pines here in the South, these trees are viewed as "weeds." But I like them, so I keep them. They serve to support the deer stand and to attract wildlife.

When I select trees to leave in a clearcut I consider a range of values:

- Location: Where would it look nice to see tall trees?
- Wildlife food value: Fruits, nuts, seeds, etc.
- Good place to hunt: Overlooking game trails or stream crossings.
- Ease of climbing: Modern climbing deer stands work best on straight trees with diameters that fit the climber.
- Not the best timber trees: Unless it is intended as a seed source for the next generation, I prefer to sell the more valuable trees.
- Number: I leave two or three times as many as I want because the leave trees will suffer high mortality from ice and wind after their protecting neighbors are cut.
- Picturesque form: If you have artistic sense, leave "wolf trees" and other trees of interesting shape.

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